

Taking the Language Classroom into the Real World

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Aichi Prefectural University commenced its Global Human Resource Development (GHRD) Project in 2012 with the fundamental goal of cultivating global citizens. At the core of the project lay the 2013 launch of a new multilingual learning centre (iCoToBa), and the implementation of a range of extra-curricular iCoToBa classes.

These classes target not only linguistic goals, but also international cultivation, presentation skills, information literacy, communication skills, adaptability to other cultures, problem-finding & solving skills, and management abilities; as stipulated in the GHRD Project guidelines. Effective communication on a global stage requires more than simply linguistic ability and iCoToBa classes aim to help students to build the intercultural competence necessary for successful cross-cultural communication.

“Global” English & Intercultural Competence

It has long been acknowledged that cultural understanding plays an important role in effective cross-cultural communication, and that the teaching of culture should be incorporated in some way into language instruction. In the context of English-language education today however, this approach is of limited value. Communication in English is no longer limited to interactions with or between native speakers. Nowadays we see an increasing number of English-language interactions taking place between nonnative speakers of the language (Graddol, 1997). This gives rise to a virtually endless list of possible interlocutors with whom our students may wish or need to use their English in the future. The domains in which language may be used are similarly numerous and impossible to predict.

How then, can we possibly hope to equip our students with enough knowledge to ensure success in their future English interactions? Communication today is a process of negotiation across linguistic and conceptual divides. Friedrich (2012) says that “it is the more deeply rooted beliefs and values, the ones we are not even aware that we hold, that really make lingua franca interactions complex” (p.46). In addition to teaching linguistic and cultural knowledge then, we need to help students to identify their own cultural backgrounds, and consider how those operate as cultural filters to shape their values, beliefs and language.

J-Ambassador Course

The J-Ambassador course seeks to address both linguistic and intercultural goals, developing students’ intercultural competence to enable them to overcome communication barriers whatever the cultural divide. The course is in its second year, with two concurrent courses

running every semester and intensive summer courses offered in both 2013 and 2014. One hundred and twenty-six students have joined the course to-date.

The course focuses on communication across a wide range of cultures and contexts rather than with one “target culture”. The aim is to equip students with tools to help them adapt and communicate in any cultural situation. The J-Ambassador course takes an “inside-out” approach; challenging students to first examine their own culture. As they practice communicating their ideas, students gain the linguistic knowledge and skills to more effectively communicate details about themselves, whilst gaining a better understanding of their own cultural filters and thus achieving greater awareness of other perspectives and approaches to communication.

J-Ambassador classes guide students through discussions on a range of topics linked to the central theme of “Japanese culture”. The course culminates in a group project to give students the opportunity to consolidate what they have learned, as they consider in greater depth one element of culture that is of interest to them. In 2013, the group project took the form of a class website in first semester and an in-class presentation in second semester. All students fulfilled the project requirements, but many displayed a lack of genuine engagement, and effort tended to be desultory rather than enthusiastic. In its second year the course has endeavoured to incorporate projects that are more effective in motivating students and encouraging them to utilise skills and strategies acquired through the course.

Real-World Projects

Authentic materials and activities have been widely praised for the learner benefits they provide in the language classroom. Scholars hold that activities that bring the outside world into the classroom have beneficial effects on student motivation, as they have a high utility value, and are more interesting for the students (Dornyei, 2001). Authentic activities are also seen as useful in allowing students to contextualise their language learning and in reinforcing the direct relationship between the classroom and the outside world (Oura, n.d.).

Project-based learning is gaining acclaim in language classrooms as an effective way to allow students to engage with language authentically. Bell explains that project-based learning is valuable for students in all classrooms, allowing them to acquire technology skills, become better communicators, and improve their problem solving skills (Bell, 2010). It offers the further benefit of promoting exchange and reflection on different views and can be a great motivator in the language classroom, as it allows students to operate with greater autonomy, fosters group cohesiveness, and creates a higher expectancy of success (Dornyei, 2001).

The 2014 J-Ambassador courses have attempted to embrace both authentic-material use and project-based learning. Each course aims to incorporate collaborative projects allowing students

to utilise their language skills in genuine real-world communication. Three real-world projects implemented in 2014 are outlined below.

1. JICA Subculture Workshop

The general admission J-Ambassador course offered in the first semester of 2014 incorporated a workshop project. The lecturer coordinated with JICA Chubu to facilitate a 90-minute workshop for J-Ambassador students and JICA trainees. A group of twelve Mexican trainees undergoing professional training at JICA Chubu expressed interest in “Japanese subculture” and it was decided that the university students would plan and implement a workshop on the topic.

Students decided that small group discussion would be the most effective way to implement the workshop. The class divided into six groups, and group members worked together to gather background information related to their chosen topic, and put together discussion questions to stimulate discussion with the trainees. Two groups took on the additional responsibility of beginning and ending the session.

Students and trainees engaged in small group discussions related to *gokon*, cosplay, sumo, idol groups, *yurukyara* and festivals, with the trainees moving to a new group after fifteen minutes of discussion. This system meant the J-Ambassador students led multiple discussions on the same topic and were able to alter and improve their moderation and leadership techniques each time.



Aichi Prefectural University students and JICA trainees at JICA Chubu.

2. UEA Cultural Exchange Sessions

A second J-Ambassador course was implemented in the first semester for students joining a summer program at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Four cultural exchange sessions (involving students from both universities) were incorporated into the summer program schedule. Preparation for these sessions became the main project for the J-Ambassador (UEA) students. Student groups were each made responsible for the planning and implementation of one session, with the lecturer acting as mediator between the students and the UK Program Coordinator. Students decided the theme, style and (where possible) practical details such as time and location of their sessions, and were encouraged to be creative in finding ways to promote mutual exchange with UK students rather than limiting themselves to unidirectional

presentation-style events.

The four cultural exchange sessions comprised an introductory session, a discussion related to historical buildings and traditional architecture, a food-culture exchange and a cultural-exchange festival. J-Ambassador students prepared discussion prompts, games, crafts, presentations, foods and a range of hands-on activities to facilitate exchange with UEA students and staff.

3. UNESCO ESD Booklet

An intensive version of the 2014 J-Ambassador course was offered during the summer vacation, with students completing two “classes” each day to accelerate their speed through the course. The timing of this course coincided with preparations for the UNESCO ESD Conference held in Nagoya in November this year. For their group project, summer J-Ambassador students worked together to prepare a small Nagoya guidebook for use by conference participants. The aim of the guidebook was to introduce aspects of “real” Japanese culture and daily life from a student perspective. Students wrote simple concise introductions to places, foods, etiquette, souvenirs etc. that they wanted to recommend, with a focus on using English that would be accessible and understandable from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. The resulting 23-page booklet (available online at <http://www.for.aichi-pu.ac.jp/icotoba/news/2014/001199.html>) was made available to conference participants at the conference venue, Chubu International Airport, and major hotels in Nagoya, and was featured in reports in local and national newspapers.



Chunichi Shinbun November 8th



Nikkei Shinbun November 5th

Closing Remarks

The real-world projects challenged students to draw on both intercultural and linguistic tools to achieve appropriate communication and accomplish a genuine communicative goal. The 2014 projects appeared to achieve a greater degree of student engagement and enjoyment than the more class-centred projects implemented in 2013, with students reporting that although they found the real-world projects difficult, they enjoyed them, and felt rewarded by the end result of their efforts.

In the workshop and cultural exchange sessions in particular, many students said that they

discovered difficulties and challenges that they had not expected or planned for. Such experiences are valuable opportunities for students to learn and adapt in order to be better-prepared in future real-world interactions. These two-way exchanges had the further benefit of allowing students to gain explicit information about the culture of the participants, whilst also finding ways to clearly explain their own.

Real-world projects are a valuable teaching tool. Finding an appropriate source of such opportunities however, and working them into the relatively rigid timeframe of an academic semester, is challenging. One way to address this could be in the establishment of more long-term projects, spanning multiple semesters and student groups (eg. an ongoing video-letter exchange with students at an overseas university). Such long-term projects require careful planning and continued commitment by all parties concerned, but if successful could, together with short-term local projects, provide an ongoing source of real-world projects for use in the J-Ambassador course.

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